



Youth Voices - How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts:

Findings from Youth Focus Groups

Statewide, only 79.9 percent of the 74,380 students who entered high school as ninth graders in 2002 or transferred into the class – the 2006 “cohort” – graduated within four years. Over the course of those four years, more than 8,700 students (11.7 percent) had dropped out. In 2006, the Department’s Student and Secondary Support Unit conducted seven youth focus groups across the Commonwealth to hear, learn from, and share the perspectives of Massachusetts youth.

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INTRODUCTION

"Dropping out of school is a \$1.5 million dollar decision. This is the average lifetime earnings difference between a high school dropout and a college graduate. Today's employers want people with college degrees, so there aren't many opportunities for high school dropouts. It's our responsibility as educators to catch at-risk students early, provide the extra help and attention they require, and help them graduate with their peers." Commissioner David P. Driscoll

Statewide, only 79.9 percent of the 74,380 students who entered high school as ninth graders in 2002 or transferred into the class – the 2006 “cohort” – graduated within four years. Over the course of those four years, more than 8,700 students (11.7 percent) had dropped out.¹

The numbers are even more striking for subgroup populations, as more than twenty percent of students in five subgroups had dropped out by the end of four years (Hispanic, Limited English Proficient, Pacific Islander, Low-Income, and Urban). Furthermore, three additional subgroups have four-year dropout rates above 17 percent (Special Education, African-American, and Native American). Moreover, during the 2005-2006 year alone, a total of 9,910 from grades nine through twelve dropped out of school.² During the previous year, a total of 11,145 youth (3.8) from grades nine through twelve dropped out.³

The consequences of not graduating from high school are clearly stated in Northeastern University economist Andrew Sum's new study, "An Assessment of the Labor Market, Income, Health, Social, Civic and Fiscal Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Findings for Massachusetts Adults in the 21st Century."⁴ For example, high school dropouts can expect to earn at least \$500,000 less over the course of their lifetime than high school graduates. Moreover, for employed workers, only 36 percent of dropouts have health insurance, as compared to 48 percent of high school graduates and 67 percent of those with college degrees.

This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce, as noted by the National Center for Education and the Economy in their 2007 report “Tough Choices *OR* Tough Times.”⁵

FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Inspired by the national report, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, and the value of student feedback specific to Massachusetts, the Student and Secondary Support Unit at the Massachusetts Department of Education (the Department) conducted seven youth focus groups across the Commonwealth. Sites were selected based on the need of Department staff to speak with youth in different regions as well as to speak with youth involved in a range of academic settings. The focus groups were conducted between April and October 2006.

All focus groups were asked the same general set of open-ended questions that centered around four main topics: 1) what youth like most about school, 2) what youth like least about school, 3) why students drop out of high school, and 4) how schools should be improved. A total of five Department staff members conducted the group discussions (one or two staff per discussion), and

two graduate student interns also participated in one of the discussions. While the same set of general questions were asked of each group, the ways of phrasing each question varied by each interviewer, and participant responses influenced the direction of each discussion.

Youth Participants

Five of the focus groups were conducted in urban areas, one was in a suburban area, and one was in a rural area.⁶ Some focus groups were conducted with current students and some with youth who had dropped out of school. More specifically:

- Three of the focus groups included students enrolled in Alternative Education programs⁷ who had previously demonstrated indications of being a potential dropout of school (e.g., a high number of absences, poor grades, and disinterest in school).
- One of the focus groups included potential dropouts enrolled in a regular high school program.
- One of the focus groups was comprised predominantly of students who were English language learners or formerly limited English proficient.
- One of the focus groups included students who had previously dropped out of school and were in the process of pursuing high school equivalency diplomas through a GED Program.
- One of the focus groups was conducted with students who had dropped out of school and were not involved with a GED or other educational program.

A total of 65 youth shared their thoughts through these seven focus groups. These youth were all of high school age (approximately 14 to 20 years old). At the time of the focus groups, nearly 88 percent of the youth (57 of 65) were enrolled in school (although some reported that they had previously dropped out and subsequently returned to school), while eight youth had dropped out and were not planning to return to high school. Based on Department staff observations, 38 percent of the students were male and 62 percent were female, and approximately one-third were White and two-thirds were non-White.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

What Youth Like Most About School

The main theme that emerged regarding what youth liked most about school was *positive relationships* – both among their peers and with adults.

Peer Relationships

In all of the focus groups, youth mentioned the positive peer social aspects of school – including opportunities to see friends and to meet new people. One youth specifically noted that the social features of school were a factor for staying in school.

Adult Relationships

Many focus group participants spoke about having “cool” or “good” teachers who they felt cared about their academic and personal well being.

The participants from Alternative Education programs mentioned several factors directly related to the program

“It is important to find teachers that you are comfortable with. Some teachers care, some teachers don’t give up on you. These are teachers that motivate. There is a need for different teaching strategies for different kids. Good teachers are those that are supportive and patient and understand kids.”

– Focus Group Participant

environment that they enjoyed – all of which are related to positive relationships with adults. They mentioned caring and attentive staff, positive relationships with adults, small classes, and individual support with academics. Many also mentioned that they would have not remained in school if they had not joined the program.

What Youth Like Least About School

Three main themes emerged regarding what focus group participants liked least about school: school climate and atmosphere, school disciplinary practices, and uninteresting academic classes.

School Climate and Atmosphere

Many focus group participants talked about disliking the overall “atmosphere” of the school – including large class or school size, distractions due to “obnoxious” peers or peer “drama,” and safety issues related to gang activity, student fights, and bullying.

“[I dropped out] not ‘cause school was hard... I just didn’t like the atmosphere.”

– Focus Group Participant

Disciplinary Practices

Youth in several of the focus groups spoke about feeling that the school was too “punishment-oriented” – meaning that there was a lack of rewards and privileges for students, uneven or double-standard discipline, and/or use of discipline practices that did not assist students in solving their problems (e.g., out-of-school suspensions).

“Faculty dismisses acting-out, doing poorly as just ‘it is what it is’... they don’t investigate why students are like that.”

– Focus Group Participant

Uninteresting Academics

Among all of the focus groups, youth mentioned that “boring” classes and teachers was one of the things they liked least about school. In particular, students stated that they felt some teachers did not care about the classes they taught. Several of the students talked about feeling a lack of motivation and difficulty focusing as a result of classes not being interesting.

“You can tell when teachers don’t care... when they are there just because it’s a job.”

– Focus Group Participant

Why Students Drop Out of High School

Nearly all of the youth who participated in the focus groups had dropped out of school, considered doing so, and/or had at least one family member or friend who had done so. The focus group participants were asked why they think these people they knew had dropped out of school (or why they themselves had considered or actually dropped out of school). The youth provided a variety of answers, which fell into two general categories – school-related factors and external/personal factors.

School-Related Factors

Focus group participants reported that students leave due to a number of school-related factors. The following were the most common reasons mentioned during the focus groups:

- Being generally “overwhelmed” by school;
- Falling behind on credits and struggling to keep up, often due to absenteeism and/or out-of-school suspensions;
- Lack of perceived “help” from school staff;

- School staff recommendations to drop out and enter a GED (General Educational Development) or other alternative high school program or charter school;
- School environments that felt “restrictive;”
- Lack of respect from school staff; and
- Poor student-teacher relationships.

“I think they [school administration] are trying to filter out students from the school.”

– Focus Group Participant

External and Personal Factors

In addition to the school-related factors, the focus group participants mentioned many external-to-school factors contributing to leaving school as well. The following were the most frequent responses cited for external or personal factors that related to leaving school:

- Needing or wanting jobs/income;
- Skipping school with friends;
- Mental, emotional, or physical health problems;
- Lack of parental support;
- Drug or partying influences; and
- Family and personal problems.

“There are so many other things are going on besides school – school is not a priority.”

– Focus Group Participant

Views on How Schools Should Be Improved

When directly asked what should be done to improve schools, the youth discussed a number of ideas. The most common ideas are listed below in three main categories: school policies, respect and support, and academics.

School Policies

The youth mentioned several policy-related factors that would improve schools. The following were the most frequent policies mentioned by the focus group participants:

- Offer “open campus” as an earned privilege (e.g., being allowed to leave school for lunch;
- Begin the school day later in the morning;
- Provide in-house suspension programs; and
- Have longer school lunches and more breaks during the day.

Respect and Support

Focus group participants talked about the theme of more respect and support for all students. In particular, youth discussed:

- More individual attention from teachers – school staff should take time to “get to know” students;
- More respect and honesty towards students; and
- Additional student support programs, such as daycare for teen parents and counseling services.

“You can feel like just another number in a big school.”

– Focus Group Participant

Academics

Several themes related to academics emerged throughout the focus groups. The most common topic mentioned was having *smaller classes*.

“It would be helpful to have an assistant in the classroom who can work with individual students while those students who understand can keep going. It’s embarrassing to be the only student that doesn’t understand what’s going on. In big classes, you can get lost.” – Focus Group Participant

In addition to smaller classes, the youth had several other academic-related ideas for improving schools:

- Teachers need to really teach – not just give out homework;
- Additional tutors and teacher aides to assist in classrooms;
- More hands-on activities; and
- More after-school activities and programs.

NEXT STEPS

Lessons for Schools

Several important themes emerged that were common among all of the focus groups and throughout the responses to each of the questions. The focus group youth conveyed that the following four, school-related components can significantly help prevent students from dropping out (and help attending students succeed):

1. Positive, caring relationships – with both school staff and peers;
2. Fair policies – so all students are treated reasonably and respectfully;
3. Interesting academics, including hands-on activities; and
4. Small class sizes with individual academic support when needed.

Next Steps for the Department

In light of the critical role a quality education plays in the lives of youth across the Commonwealth, the Department must help schools implement the four components noted above. Over the upcoming months and years, the Department plans to seek ways to incorporate these four main components into technical assistance and training opportunities, as well as into select grant program parameters, so that schools and its partners are better able to engage and support students. Additionally, the Department is in process of developing a more comprehensive and evolving strategy to find ways for all students to earn high school diplomas and graduate college and career ready.

The Department is committed to continue working in partnership with policy makers, communities, parents, school districts, and youth to build a system that will prepare all students to succeed as productive and contributing members of our democratic society and the global economy. All are invited and urged to join this effort.

ENDNOTES

¹ Information from this paragraph and the next can be found in this report:
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.asp?id=3249>.

² For the full report, see: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0506/summary.doc>

³ For the full report, see: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0405/summary.doc>

⁴ For the full report, see: http://www.bostonpic.org/youth/youth_pdfs/CLMS_Dropout_Social_Cost_94P.pdf

⁵ For the full report, see: <http://skillscommission.org/executive.htm>.

⁶ For reasons of confidentiality, the exact sites and youth names will not be identified in this document.

⁷ For the definition of Alternative Education in Massachusetts, see:
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/alted/about.html?section=definition>